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A NOTE ON CANT

The *New English Dictionary* gives the following derivation for "cant":

This and its accompanying vb. presumably represent L. *cant-us* singing, song, chant (Pr. and NFr. *Cant*, Fr. *Chant*), *canta-re* NFr. *canter*) to sing, chant; but the details of the derivation and development of sense are unknown, . . . or the word may have been actually made from Lat. or Romanic in the rogues' jargon of the time. The subsequent development assumed in the arrangement of the verb is quite natural, though not actually established. Some have however conjectured that *cant* is the Irish and Gaelic *cainnt*, . . . 'language.' And as early as 1711 the word was asserted to be derived from the name of Andrew Cant or his son Alexander Cant, Presbyterian ministers of the 17th c. This perhaps means that the surname of the two Cants was occasionally associated derisively with canting. The arrangement of the sb. here is tentative, and founded mainly on that of the vb., which appears on the whole earlier.

Other late dictionaries derive the word from the Latin *canta-re*, and give no heed to the suggestion that the proper name Cant has had any influence in the development of the word.¹ In earlier discussions of the word's origin any connection with the Presbyterian ministers is either denied or else designated as 'whimsical' or 'groundless.'² The connection made in 1711 between the common noun and the name of the two ministers is to be found in the *Spectator*, in a paper written by Steele.³ The passage reads:

This Indifferency seems to me to arise from the Endeavour of avoiding the imputation of Cant, and the false notion of it. It will be proper therefore to trace the Original and Signification of

¹ See the recent editions of *Webster's*, the *Century*, and the *Standard Dictionaries*.

² See Blaikie's article on Andrew Cant, *D. N. B.* iii, 898; J. Jamieson's *Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, ed. 1779 s. v. cant; *The Spectator*, ed. Morley, p. 218; Farmer and Henry, *Slang and its Analogues*, ii, s. v. cant. The earlier lexicographers are content to derive the word from *canta-re*. See the dictionaries of Johnson, of Phillips, and of Bailey, among others.

³ *Spectator*, no. 147, Saturday, August 18, 1711.

this Word. Cant is, by some People. derived from one *Andrew Cant* who, they say, was a Presbyterian Minister in some Illiterate part of Scotland, who by Exercise and Use had obtained the Faculty, *alias* Gift, of Talking in the Pulpit in such a Dialect, that it's said he was understood by none but his own Congregation, and not by all of them. Since *Mas. Cant's* time, it has been understood in a larger Sense, and signifies all sudden Exclamations, Whinings, unusual Tones, and in fine all Praying and Preaching like the unlearned of the Presbyterians.

According to Steele, the primary meaning of Cant was an intentionally obscure dialect, not understood by all of the minister's congregation, indeed. It has not been pointed out, I believe, that Steele's view had been anticipated by Thomas Blount, at least as early as 1670, when the third edition of Blount's *Glossographia* was published. Blount had written that "Canting, is an affected peculiar kinde of speech used by some people, whereby they may understand themselves, yet not be understood by others, and is said to have taken origin from Mr. *Andrew Cant*, a noted Presbyterish Minister of *Scotland*, who lived in the last Age, and was well gifted herein."⁴

As early as 1661 there had appeared in the two official English newspapers, the *Kingdomes Intelligencer* and *Mercurius Publicus*, and in the Edinburgh reprint of these,⁵ a news item which gives yet another twist to the word's derivation and meaning. The passage reads:

Mr. *Alexander Cant* son to Mr. *Andrew Cant* (who in his discourse, *De Excommunicato trucidando*, maintain'd that all Refusers of the *Covenant* ought to be excommunicated, and that all so excommunicated, might lawfully be kill'd) was lately depos'd by the Synod for divers seditious and impudent passages in his Sermons at several places, as, at the Pulpit of *Banchry*:

If ever the King made a good pudding he would eate the prick of it:

That whoever would own or make use of a Service-Book, King, Nobleman, or Minister, the curse of God should be upon him;

In his Grace after meat, he praid for those Phanatiques, and

⁴ *Glossographia*, ed. 1670, p. 101. The first edition was in 1656, but the 1670 edition is the earliest accessible in this country.

⁵ *Kingdomes Intelligencer*, no. 9, p. 144; 25 February-4 March, 1661; *Mercurius Publicus*, no. 9, pp. 132-133; *Mercurius Publicus*, Edinburgh reprint, 28 February, 1661.

Seditious Ministers, (who are now secured) ⁶ in these words, *The Lord pittie and deliver the precious Prisoners who are now suffering for the Truth, and close up the mouths of the Edomites, who are now rejoycing*, with several other Articles too long to recite.

From these two *Cants*, (*Andrew and Alexander*) all seditious praying and preaching in *Scotland* is called canting.

That is to say, within ten years the two *Cants* had been credited with the origin of the word *canting* in two separate senses, "seditious praying and preaching," and a peculiar form of speech understood by a limited audience. The confusion is cleared up a little by an explanation of the established uses of *cant* before 1660. The earliest connection of *cant* with any form of speech was in regard to the curious language used by the rogues and vagabonds. As early as 1567 Harmon wrote, in his *Caveat for Cursitors*,⁷ "Here I set before the good Reader the leud, lousey language of these lewtering Luskies and lasy Lorrels, . . . Whyche language they terme Peddelars Frenche, a vnknownen tounge onely, but to these bold, beastly, bawdy Beggars, and vaine Vacabondes." Harmon glosses "to cante" as simply "to speake."⁸ In 1586 William Harrison wrote that the vagabonds "haue deuised a language among themselves, which they name *Canting* (but other pedlers French)—a speach compact thirtie yeares since of English, and a great number of od words of their owne deuising, without all order or reason: and yet such is it as none but themselves are able to understand. The first deuiser thereof was hanged by the necke,—a iust reward, no doubt, for his deserts, and a common end to all of that profession."⁹ Dekker referred frequently to the 'canting language' of the rogues, "which none but themselves should vnderstand,"¹⁰ and thought the word "derived from the latine *verbe (canto)*."¹¹ Clearly one does not need to seek further for the source of Blount's

⁶ These were the "Fifth Monarchy" men.

⁷ See the reprint by Viles and Furnivall, *Early English Text Society*, Extra series 9, p. 82.

⁸ *Loc. cit.*, p. 84.

⁹ Quoted in E. E. T. S. Extra Series, no. 9, p. xii.

¹⁰ The Bel-man of London, 1608; Lanthorne and Candle-light, or, the Bell-mans second Nights-walke, 1609; English Villanies seven severall Times prest to Death by the Printers, 1638. See *The Non-dramatic Works of Dekker*, ed. Grosart, 1885, iii, 84, 193-4.

¹¹ *Non-dramatic Works*, iii, 194.

and Steele's notion that our 'Presbyterish ministers' spoke in a language intelligible to only a few.

So far as their idea is concerned, it seems obvious enough that, instead of the two Cants having had any influence on the meaning of *cant*, the word, in a perfectly established sense, was applied to their unintelligible manner of preaching. We have still, however, to account for the news item, and for the additional meaning of insincere and hypocritical speech, which was first applied to *cant* in the middle of the seventeenth century.

The item in question appeared while both the Cants were alive, and, as we shall see presently, well known. The two official newspapers in London, although issued on different days of the week, generally contained identically the same material, and the Edinburgh edition of *Mercurius Publicus* was merely a reprint of the London edition. Hence there is nothing remarkable in the appearance of the same article in three separate newsbooks in the same week. One point needs emphasis; the newsbooks were under somewhat rigid governmental control, and naturally expressed the proper political and religious opinions.

It is almost certain that the item was written somewhere in Scotland by an established correspondent of the official newspapers. Presumably the correspondent was reporting a local opinion, when he wrote that "From these two *Cants*—all seditious praying and preaching in *Scotland* is called canting." To the loyal correspondent, "seditious praying and preaching" would, of course, be a more deadly sin than a hypocritical voice or expression, and the ideas attributed to the Cants were certainly seditious in 1661. It is by no means unusual, however, among simple-minded folk, to characterize any difference of opinion as necessarily insincere, so that the word *seditious* might in fact include a connotation of hypocrisy. At any rate, it is clear that popular etymology connected the names of the two ministers with some objectionable fashion of preaching.

Furthermore, this connection was given public utterance very shortly after the earliest recorded use of cant in respect to religious matters. In 1659, the Presbyterians, it was said, made "an insipid, tedious, and immethodical prayer, in phrases and a tone so affected and mysterious that they give it the name of canting: a term by which they usually express the gibberish of beggars and

vagabonds.”¹² Here is, of course, a mingling of the ideas of obscurity and affectation. The following passage from a newsbook of 1661 seems to have escaped attention, and is certainly of some bearing. The journalist wrote of the “bloody Phanaticks—who, in their hypocriticall canting *Sermons* and *Declarations* speak much of *Mercy* and *tender bowels*, at that very time when they were harnessing themselves to murther us in our Beds.”¹³ In this same paper there appeared six weeks later the article already quoted, equating “seditious praying and preaching,” and “canting.” It is possible that the same correspondent wrote both accounts. Additional evidence that the application of canting to the speech of the clergy came after 1650 is found in another newsbook, this time a Royalist one, the *Mercurius Rusticus*, which appeared first in 1643, and was reprinted as a volume in 1647 and again in 1685. A quotation from one of Dr. Featly’s sermons was printed in the 1685 edition as follows: “Thou givest thy mouth to lying, and thy Tongue frameth deceit. Thou sittest and speakest against thy Brother, and slanderest thine own Mothers son. *For is not this their canting language?* The Prelates of *England* are all Antichristian; The Ministers *Baals Priests*.”¹⁴ In the 1647 edition the line reads, “For is not this their chanting Language.”¹⁵ Unless this be regarded as a printer’s error, and therefore fortuitous, it would seem to indicate that by 1685 *canting* was a well recognized term to apply to preachers whose utterances were hypocritical, extravagant, or seditious.

The question now arises, did the extension of meaning of the word cant from a secret language (Peddlars’ French) to seditious, insincere, and hypocritical speech, owe anything to the Scotch clergymen whose names were curiously connected with it by popular repute? It must be reiterated that this connection was actually made in print in 1661, within two years of the earliest recorded use of cant in the sense of religious hypocrisy, but at a time when such use was apparently fast coming in. Now the two Cants, and especially the elder, were famous men in their day, were both min-

¹² N. E. D. s. v. canting. Quoted from *a Character of England*, in Harl. Misc. x, 191.

¹³ *Mercurius Publicus*, no. 2, p. 17; 10-17 January 1661.

¹⁴ *Mercurius Rusticus*, no. xviii, p. 195, ed. 1685.

¹⁵ *Mercurius Rusticus*, no. xviii, p. 168, ed. 1647.

isters, and gave utterance to certain ideas in terms which today would be best described as cant of the most rabid variety. These factors are all pertinent. Had they been obscure men, it is unlikely that any such connection would ever have been made. The fact that they were ministers would make such an extension of meaning the more likely, since religious hypocrisy is probably of wider occurrence than any other variety. Since some of their ideas were irrationally narrow and extreme, it is not difficult to find a logical connection between the men themselves and the generally accepted notion conveyed by the word *canting*.

Andrew Cant's career has been fairly well given elsewhere,¹⁶ and only the essentials are required here. He was born in 1584, was educated at Aberdeen, and for a time taught Latin. In 1614 he was promoted to a benefice. In 1621 he received the popular vote for Minister of Edinburgh, but it was reported, "as from the Bishop, that the King would not be content; because he had heard of his seditious Sermons."¹⁷ In 1623 another movement to put Cant into the Edinburgh pulpit failed, again on account of pressure from the higher authorities, in spite of the protests of the people. A year later the King requested the Bishop of St. Andrews "to take order with three Ministers that were most earnest against" certain excommunicants, and Andrew Cant was one of the three.

He was inducted minister of Aberdeen in 1641, where he promptly began a crusade against the vices of his people, denouncing private baptism, tolling the bell at funerals, eating beef at Easter, and especially making merry at Christmas. He instituted lectures on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, from which "no honest person durst be absent but were rebuked and cried out against." On the frequent fast-days from eight to twelve hours were occupied in public worship, and to enforce the abstinence of his parishioners, he appointed certain pious members to search all kitchens. Some of his flock murmured, saying that because "Mr. Andrew spake against Yule, he spake like an old fool."

He achieved prominence among the Puritans in Charles the

¹⁶ See the article in *D. N. B.*, and that by Joseph Robertson, in *Deliciae Literariae*, pp. 17-27. (London, 1840.)

¹⁷ David Calderwood, *The True History of the Church of Scotland*, p. 788.

First's time, and seems to have been the most active partizan of the Covenant in the North of Scotland.

From Dickson, Henderson, and Cant,
Apostles of the Covenant,
Almighty God deliver us.¹⁸

reads a burlesque litany of those times. He was also the hero of a curious song, "The Guise of Tyrie,"¹⁹ in which he figured as "bobbing Andrew." There is a legend that Cant, always severely opposed to anything that smacked of Popery, once requested his landlord to remove from his room pictures of some Catholic Saints. "St. Peter was removed, and Cant's picture put in its place, with the following lines:

Come down, St. Peter,
Ye superstitious saint,
And let up your better—
Mr. Andrew Cant.²⁰

He preached frequently before the Scottish Parliament; for example, six times between the 7th of December, 1645, and the following February.²¹ In 1648 a pamphlet attributed to him was published, in which it was argued that those who failed to subscribe to the Covenant were excommunicated, and might lawfully be killed. He was one of the five leaders of the General Assembly in 1649, and in the next year was Moderator of that body. That his influence was a powerful one cannot be doubted, since both English and Scottish authorities went out of their way to placate him.²² He died in 1663, in his seventy-ninth year, having given up his church a year or so earlier on account of charges of seditious speech, "and for denouncing *anathemas* and *imprecations* against many of his congregation, in the course of performing his religious duties."²³ His highly eulogistic epitaph should not be taken as entirely repre-

¹⁸ *Third Book of Scottish Pasquils*, Edinburgh, 1828, p. 47.

¹⁹ Buchan inserted this in his *Ancient Ballads and Songs of the North of Scotland*, i, 226.

²⁰ Buchan, i, 318.

²¹ Sir James Balfour, *The Annals of Scotland*, iii, 326 and *passim*.

²² See Bulstrode Whitelock's *Memorials*, p. 493 (London, 1682), and Balfour's *Annales*, iv, 161.

²³ Chambers' *Biographical Dictionary*, i, 495, (ed. 1840) and F. W. Scott, *Fasti Ecclesiae Scoticanæ*, part vi, p. 463.

sentative of public opinion, since he was called a "most fiery and intolerant bigot."²⁴

It is interesting, too, to note that no other Scotch clergyman of the Civil War period was so well advertised in the English newspapers. In 1646 the *Perfect Diurnall* reported that His Majesty, then at Newcastle, had been visited by three Scotch ministers, come "to satisfie his scruple of conscience about taking the Covenant." Cant's name was the first of the three.²⁵ The same newspaper a year later gave an account of a duel caused by "a passage in Mr. Andrew Cants Sermon."²⁶ In 1652 Cant's "buttoned Cassock and Buckie Ruff" caused him to be attacked in the English newspapers for secretly leaning toward the Church of Rome.²⁷ The Scotch correspondent a little later complained of the "unlimited power of Cardinall Cant; who though he hath left off the wearing of his button'd Coat (consisting of 36 Dozen) wherein he thought to have Crowned the King, as his predecessors the priests did, yet he wears his Ruff still, looking in it (in a Pulpit) as Puss in Majesty."²⁸ Ambition and pride, thought the journalist, were Cant's "two inherent sins." In 1662 Alexander Cant was mentioned as "son to the notorious Mr. Andrew Cant."²⁹ These references are enough to show in what fashion Cant's name came before the English people, but they are by no means exhaustive, as a very superficial search of some of the Civil War newsbooks revealed a dozen more.³⁰ While the younger Cant received nothing like the publicity given to his father, yet he too was notorious in 1661 and 1662 on account of his failing to take the Oath of Allegiance.³¹ Certainly in both character and reputation the two Cants could

²⁴ *Notes and Queries*, 4th Series, v, 337-8, 16 April, 1870.

²⁵ *A Perfect Diurnall*, no. 164, p. 1317; 14-21 Sept. 1646.

²⁶ *A Perfect Diurnall*, no. 243, p. 1955; 20-27 March, 1648.

²⁷ *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 111, p. 1613-14, 19-26 Jan. 1651/2.

²⁸ *Perfect Diurnall*, no. 118, p. 1731, 8-15 March 1651/2.

²⁹ *Kingdomes Intelligencer*, no. 51, p. 882; 15-22 Dec. 1662.

³⁰ See *The Perfect Diurnall*, no. 174, p. 2619, 28 Mch.-4 April 1652; no. 140, p. 2080, 9-16 Aug. 1652; no. 118, p. 1732, 8-15 Mch. 1651/2; no. 130, p. 1922, 31 May-7 June 1652; no. 138, p. 2049-59, 26 July-2 Aug. 1652; no. 69, p. 933, 31 Mch.-7 Apr. 1651. *Kingdomes Intelligencer*, no. 22, p. 366, 2-9 June, 1662; no. 10, p. 156, 4-11 Mch. 1660; no. 35, p. 552, 26 Aug.-2 Sept. 1661.

³¹ *Kingdomes Intelligencer*, no. 35, p. 552, 26 Aug.-2 Sept. 1661; no. 51, p. 882, 15-22 Dec. 1662; no. 9, p. 144, 25 Feb.-4 Mch. 1661.

scarcely be better fitted to influence in some degree the extension of the word *canting*.

It is instructive to note in what variations the newspaper item turned up in the course of years. "From these two *Cants* (*Andrew* and *Alexander*)," read the original notice, "all seditious praying and preaching in *Scotland* is called Canting." The shift made by Blount, and later by Steele, has already been noted. Pennant, writing in 1775, thought that "Andrew canted no more than the rest of his brethren, for he lived in a whining age."³² In 1859 the two *Cants* were referred to as "Oliver and Ezekiel."³³ The news item of 1661 was reprinted *verbatim* in 1854, but since the last sentence, "From these two *Cants*," &c., somehow escaped inclusion in the quotation, and appeared simply as an observation of the nineteenth century contributor instead of the seventeenth century reporter, it received no attention.³⁴ Twice in the eighteenth century the quotation was correctly given, both times by Zachary Gray,³⁵ but in obscure footnotes, so that it is not surprising to find stated in the *New English Dictionary* that "as early as 1711 the word was asserted to be derived from the name of Andrew Cant."

From this investigation the following facts emerge. First, a word *cant*, of uncertain origin, was applied to the secret language of the vagabonds in the middle of the sixteenth century. Secondly, about a hundred years later, *cant* was used in reference to some objectionable forms of praying or preaching. In the third place, in 1661 there found its way into print a popular belief that the two Scotch ministers named Cant were in some fashion the cause of this new word or meaning. Fourthly, these two men possessed qualities which were at all events eminently suited to influence the meaning of a word already known. These are all demonstrable facts, from which one is tempted to infer that the Scotch divines actually did influence the meaning of the word. But I shall content myself with a suggestion from William Bates, who wrote in 1870, with something less than the customary caution of philolo-

³² *Tour in Scotland*, i, 122.

³³ *Notes and Queries*, 2nd Series, vii, 157-8, 19 Feb. 1859.

³⁴ *Notes and Queries*, 1st Series, ix, p. 103 (1854).

³⁵ See Gray's edition of *Hudibras*, ii, 289 (London, 1764); and his *Impartial Examination of the fourth Volume of Mr. Daniel Neal's History of the Puritans*, p. 126 (London, 1739).

gians, "I think it not improbable that the word is derivable from two distinct sources, and that in its earlier meaning it has been supplanted by the one derived from the name of the Scottish Presbyterian."⁵⁶

ROGER P. MCCUTCHEON.

Denison University.

'PRIDE' IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY THOUGHT

In *Mod. Lang. Notes* for April, 1920, Mr. Lucius W. Elder has published a contribution to a type of study which one could wish to see more pursued among us—a study which takes as the ultimate units to which its analysis is to be applied neither individual authors or schools nor literary *genres*, but individual *ideas*, and endeavors to clarify the meaning of each of the fashionable or ruling conceptions, categories, presuppositions, or logical motifs of a period, to discover the reasons for its vogue, to exhibit its interweaving and interaction with other ideas, and to trace its historic workings, not only in the reflection but also in the taste, the practice, and the social movements of the age in which it flourished. Mr. Elder notes that satirists and moralizing writers in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries were a good deal pre-occupied with a vice which they called "pride," and were given to denouncing this with peculiar vehemence. He therefore inquires into the meaning of this notion, and "its basis and analogue in the speculative theory of the Enlightenment." Mr. Elder has interestingly brought together from a number of eighteenth-century writers material bearing upon this question, and his study will be of use to students of the thought of that period. He has, however, as it seems to me, omitted certain of the most important aspects of the subject; and there is room for dissent from his general conclusions.

Mr. Elder, I think, hardly sufficiently remarks that the pride to which such a typical writer as Pope most frequently refers, in the *Essay on Man*, is not primarily the pride of the individual human creature comparing himself with others of his species, but the generic pride of man as such. The featherless biped, it was observed, has a strange tendency to put himself in the centre of

⁵⁶ *Notes and Queries*, 4th Series, v, 472, 14 May 1870.